

Film Reviews

Passione.

By John Turturro.

Skydancers and Squeezed Heart Production, 2010.

90 minutes. DVD format, color.

For film scholar Giuliana Bruno “over time, the image of Naples . . . has teetered on the verge of stereotype” (Bruno 2002, 367). *Passione*, a documentary about Neapolitan song directed by John Turturro, does not fully escape such stereotypical views of the city, as is evident already from the opening shots. The film begins with contemporary street views of the alleys and buildings of the city’s center. Then with the notes of “Carmela” interpreted by Italian singer Mina we see archival images of street urchins, vendors, and other paradigmatic figures of the Neapolitan urban landscape. Then, listening to the band Spakka-Neapolis 55 performing “Vesuvio” (a song written by Angelo De Falco of E Zézi, a music group comprised of factory workers), we see an aerial view of the city with Mount Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples—an image captured in countless photographs, postcards, and paintings. At the same time, the sound of Spakka-Neapolis 55, who blend local work and protest songs with flamenco and Arab-influenced modulations, complicates what might appear as the setup for a single and homogeneous history of Neapolitan song. Following these sounds, suspended between the local and the global, *Passione* proposes a multilayered history of Neapolitan song based on unexpected and neglected encounters across the Mediterranean, the black Atlantic, and the Americas.

Given the classic representations of street life associated with Naples, it is not surprising to see such imagery in *Passione*. Most of the songs in the film are performed in the streets and their extensions—squares, alleys, courtyards, markets, churches, the beach. Turturro is totally immersed in these streets. Many songs are introduced by Turturro himself who, instead of using the technique of voice-over narration, directly addresses the camera, inviting us to follow him in a musical journey along the streets of Naples. He looks comfortable walking these streets. There is no tourist gaze here; it is as though Turturro were at home. In an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Turturro wrote: “Naples itself reminds me a little bit of New York in the ‘70s” (Turturro 2010). Although New York City is never mentioned in *Passione*, we feel a sort of intimate and “simultaneous communication” between Naples and New York (Bruno 1993, 125). In one scene, we see a teenager singing “Dicitencello Vuje.” I could not help but imagine the streets of 1950s New York City with Italian American youth singing doo-wop on the street corners of their neighborhood. Italian American doo-wop bands like Dion and the Belmonts, for instance, grew up listening to R&B and black vocal harmony groups. Yet their sound was also influenced by Neapolitan popular songs that traveled to New York City with Neapolitan migrants.

In one of the first scenes of the film, Turturro says: “Napoli—a city that has survived earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, foreign invasions, crime, corruption, poverty, neglect, and at the same time continuously produced an avalanche of music throughout the ages. ‘A hot spot,’ as James Brown would say, ‘of song,’ covering the gamut of human

expressions: love, loss, sex, superstition, immigration, social protest, birth, death; these songs are drenched in contradiction and irony.” To quote James Brown suggests American black music is part of this story. Neapolitan music, like the blues, R&B, and funk, comes from the street. However, as in the blues and its derivatives, here the street is not a stable archive and site of authenticity. Rather, it acquires the form of “a polymorphous and multidirectional juncture” (Kun 2005, 89). Just as in black music, in Neapolitan song there is a kind of “utopic/dystopic tension” (Clifford 1997, 263): This is the instability of living under the volcano, histories of racism, marginality, loss, the impossibility of making ends meet, but also the hope of a better future.

Black music arrived in Naples with the U.S. Allied occupation of the city (1943–1947). In addition, in the 1950s Naples was chosen as the Southern Mediterranean Headquarters of NATO and as the base for the U.S. Sixth Fleet. Yet, in this encounter there is more than a simple importation of black American sound, but an encounter between the black Atlantic and an already creolized Mediterranean. A multifarious Islamic culture was central to a world system that stretched from India to West Africa and much of the Mediterranean shoreline. The Iberian peninsula was Al-Andalus. Naples was already a multiethnic city in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this “cultural mélange” (Chambers 2012, 41), we can trace the influence of the blues on Mediterranean music—from Neapolitan song, to flamenco in Spain, to *rebétiko* in Athens, to *rai* in Oran, to fado in Portugal.¹ The idea of a multiethnic Mediterranean traveled to the Americas, too. Poet Langston Hughes embraced a concept of the blues more as Afro-diasporic music rather than as a sound exclusive to an African American expression. He was struck by the similarities between the blues and flamenco during his stay in Spain (Frias 2004, 146). *Passione* re-opens this neglected archive connecting Neapolitan music with flamenco, fado, and sounds coming from northern Africa. In *Passione*, we can hear these connections in the wonderful version of “Era de Maggio,” performed by Piccola Orchestra Avion Travel, a band whose members hail from the province of Naples, and by Misia, one of the finest interpreters of Portuguese fado.

Another key performance in the film also points to this multiethnic history and the subsequent event of the encounter with African American music. The African American presence in Naples during World War II inspired Neapolitan composer E.A. Mario, who wrote a song in 1944 titled “Tammurriata Nera,” which speaks of black babies born to Neapolitan women. The song dramatizes the U.S. presence in Naples by referring specifically to the presence of African American GIs in Naples. The title “Tammurriata Nera” was also inspired by the *tammurriata*, a form of popular music and dance performed by peasants around Naples during festivals, religious feasts, and rituals. In *Passione* this vortex of voices—the peasant origin of *tammurriata*, the black element, and the U.S. military occupation of Naples—is made audible and visible in the joint performance on stage of Neapolitan singer Peppe Barra, Tunisian singer M’Barka Ben Taleb, and Italian American actor Max Casella.

This is a key moment in the movie; it connects to the life story of black Neapolitan musician James Senese, to the transatlantic movement Turturro seems so interested in underscoring. Senese was born in 1944 in Miano (a neighborhood in northern Naples), the son of a Neapolitan woman, Anna Senese, and an African American G.I., James Smith, who was in Naples with the Allied troops during World War II and returned home immediately after the war. It was not easy for Senese, the only black kid on

his block, growing up in the working-class area of Miano without his father. Senese recalls that when he happened to have an argument with other kids they immediately called him “*o nironne*,” which can be translated as “nigger.” However, on his street he also found many friends and people who loved him, in particular a woman who lived opposite his window on the other side of the alley who endearingly called him “Jamesiell,” or “little James.” In the film Senese performs a blues version of the song “*Passione*.” Like the screams of James Brown, the acerbic saxophone sound of Senese has the power “to extend communication beyond words” (Gilroy 1995, 212).

Tammurriata and work songs that originated in the fields and towns on the outskirts of Naples greatly influenced artists such as Senese, Enzo Avitabile, and Raiz. Turturro in *Passione* focuses mainly on the old historical center of Naples, yet we can hear the echo of these peripheral sounds in the performances of these artists. Their music is suspended between the suburbs of Naples—today part of a large conurbation stretching inland and along the bay—and black America. Black music becomes a tie that binds. We can trace unexpected and critical connections between the cotton fields in the U.S. South and the hemp fields in northern Naples, New York’s inner city and the deepest heart of Naples.²

This perspective emerges in the sound of Raiz and Almamegretta. In “Nun Te Scurdà” as performed in *Passione*, we have a New York–Naples connection via Kingston, Jamaica. In the scene, the heavy bass line and the echo of dub music produced by Almamegretta, the menacing voices of Raiz and Pietra Montercorvino, and the rapping style of M’Barka Ben Taleb become, as in the tradition of “roots reggae,” the voice of the silenced majority (Veal 2007, 31). Toward the end of the song we see African migrants and working-class Neapolitans sharing the same spaces in the alleys of Naples’s old center. This is a blues continuum in which the urban conditions of blacks in the United States and the Caribbean and of conditions of migrants and working class are visually conjoined to show similarities in their mutual struggles. The film ends with a favorite of contemporary Neapolitan music, Pino Daniele’s song “*Napule è*.” Daniele is a Neapolitan blues man who in his songs fuses blues, Latin jazz, Neapolitan tradition, and Arab sounds. In the late 1970s and early 1980s he was the most well-known musician in Naples. His songs are about the Neapolitan working class and the “lumpenproletariat.” They tell us about the workers in the Port of Naples who brought heavy boxes on their shoulders and were unable to inhale the sea breeze, the women who sold contraband cigarettes at the street corners, and the transgenders of the Quartieri Spagnoli. Here, music is not simply a reflection of urban struggles; it is a central part of them.

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Notes

1. Of course, I am referring here to a broader idea of the blues. The blues is part of a precise history that took place in the United States and Texas/Mexico borderlands: “Slavery, ten years of freedom, the overthrow of Reconstruction and the beginning of ninety-five years of what has been called ‘the second slavery’” (Woods 1998, 16). Yet, as the late African bluesman Ali Farka Touré explains, the blues took form thanks to the melodies

and rhythms of Muslim African slaves themselves influenced by the world of Islam (Chambers 2012, 1).

2. It is important to point out here that in the old center of Naples, especially in the areas of Porta Capuana, Montesanto, Quartieri Spagnoli, Porta Nolana, Tribunali, and Borgo di Sant'Antonio, there are large communities of migrants from locations including North Africa, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Dominican Republic, and China. Referring to the area of the *ferrovia*, which is part of the old center, Neapolitan author Peppe Lanzetta writes: "Palermo me sora, Marsiglia me mamma, Dakar me frate . . . Questa è la ferrovia!" (Palermo is my sister, Marseille is my mother, Dakar is my brother . . . That's the ferrovia, Quintavalle 2008).

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Devoti: The Documentary.

By Pete Soby.

A sobyVISION Documentary, 2013.

92 minutes. DVD format, color.

In the early 1920s, Grazia Bonafede Caniglia of Omaha, Nebraska, began raising funds to create a version of the *fiesta* in honor of Saint Lucy (known locally as the "Saint Lucia Festival") that she knew from her early years in Carlentini (Syracuse province), Sicily. By 1925, she and other early supporters had gathered enough funds to have a replica of Carlentini's Saint Lucy statue created and shipped from Italy, and the tradition of an annual Mass, procession, and feast was recreated. *Devoti: The Documentary* explores